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ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXI / 2020

Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light brown color, partially visible on the right side of the cover. It features complex geometric and organic shapes, including concentric circles, teardrop shapes, and radiating lines.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Nicola Mocchi (nicola.mocchi@unifi.it) and Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk); book reviews should be sent to Oliviero Frattolillo (oliviero.frattolillo@uniroma3.it) and Francesca Congiu (fcongiu@unica.it).



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CONTENTS

9	FILIPPO BONI, <i>Foreword. Asia in 2020: The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact</i>
19	FRANCESCA CONGIU, <i>China 2020: The successful struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic and the Xinjiang question</i>
45	SILVIA MENEGAZZI, <i>China 2020: A foreign policy characterized by growing resilience, fading responsibility and increasing uncertainty</i>
71	MARCO MILANI, <i>Korean peninsula 2020: Overcoming the challenges of COVID-19</i>
103	COREY WALLACE & GIULIO PUGLIESE, <i>Japan 2020: Abe's well-laid plans go awry</i>
147	SHELDON WONG, <i>Hong Kong 2020: The downfall of «one country two systems»</i>
181	AURELIO INSISA, <i>Taiwan 2020: Crossroads of COVID-19 international politics</i>
205	YVAN YSMAEL T. YONAHA & ESTHER MARY L. CALVO, <i>The Philippines 2020: The gamble of the populist leadership</i>
223	RUI GRAÇA FEIJÓ, <i>Timor-Leste in 2020: Containing the pandemic in a changing political environment</i>
241	SALEENA SALEEM, <i>Malaysia 2020: Democratic backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic</i>
259	MATTEO FUMAGALLI, <i>Myanmar 2020: Elections in a pandemic</i>
275	SILVIA TIERI, <i>Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of democracy, disasters, development</i>
305	DIEGO MAIORANO, <i>India 2020: Under the COVID hammer</i>
331	MICHELUGUGLIELMO TORRI, <i>India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy</i>
377	MICHELUGUGLIELMO TORRI, <i>India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US</i>
407	SHAMARA WETTIMUNY, <i>Sri Lanka 2019-2020: Extremism, elections and economic uncertainty at the time of COVID-19</i>
441	MARCO CORSI, <i>Pakistan 2020: The PTI government amidst COVID-19 pandemic</i>
465	FILIPPO BONI, <i>Afghanistan 2020: The US-Taliban peace deal, intra-Afghan talks and regional implications</i>
479	LUCIANO ZACCARA, <i>Iran 2019-2020: The double impact of crippling sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic</i>
505	PAOLO SORBELLO, <i>Kazakhstan 2020: Between a rock and a hard place</i>
521	<i>Reviews</i>
557	<i>Appendix</i>

AFGHANISTAN 2020: THE US-TALIBAN PEACE DEAL, INTRA-AFGHAN TALKS AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Filippo Boni

The Open University
Filippo.Boni@Open.ac.uk

The year 2020 was a landmark year for Afghanistan. The country witnessed the signing of the peace deal between the US and the Taliban as well as the beginning of intra-Afghan negotiations that, for the first time since 2001, brought together representatives from the Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan. These two political milestones occurred in parallel to the long-delayed final announcement of the September 2019 Presidential elections results. This was followed by a power-sharing agreement signed on 17 May, which ended the political impasse deriving from the contested electoral outcome. In Afghanistan, like in all other countries in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the country's economy and on people's livelihood. Despite a prompt government response and the implementation of some very tough lockdown rules, Afghanistan's weak health system and very limited testing capacity meant that the real scale of the negative impact of the pandemic was massive, albeit difficult to capture. With regards to Afghanistan's international relations, the year under examination was characterized by continuity in the approach that regional powers, Pakistan, India and above all China, had towards Kabul. Each of these countries has continued supporting their preferred actors on the Afghan political scene, but the peace deal between the US and the Taliban has put Pakistan in a strong position, given the long-standing support that Islamabad provided to the fundamentalist Islamic militia.

KEYWORDS – Afghanistan 2020; US-Taliban peace deal; power-sharing; peace process.

1. Introduction

After years of profound uncertainty deriving from contested parliamentary and presidential electoral results, alongside a lack of progress on the way forward in dealing with the Taliban, 2020 represented a breakthrough on a number of fronts. First, the US-Taliban peace deal was the culmination of a long negotiating process between Washington and the Taliban leaders, after nearly 20 years of war. While the implementation of the agreement has met some obstacles in the immediate aftermath, such an accord was a precondition for Afghan stakeholders – the Taliban and the elected government – to kick-start the intra-Afghan talks, aimed at defining the country's political and social future. Second, the presidential election results were eventually

announced and, despite political infighting in the ensuing months, by the end of the year a power-sharing government was in place, the cabinet largely approved, and the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) was established to oversee the peace process with the Taliban. Beyond Afghanistan's borders, the regional context was crucially important in determining Kabul's foreign policy outlook in the year under examination. The Afghan leadership sought support for the ongoing peace talks from all major regional stakeholders, including India, Pakistan, China and Iran, as well as from Central Asian Republics and Russia. It should be said that most of these countries officially reiterated their support for the talks. In fact, there was continuity in the policies adopted by regional powers in the Afghan scenario, primarily aimed at supporting their preferred actors in the peace process.

In order to shed light on the dynamics sketched out in this cursory overview of major developments, this article proceeds as follows. Section 2 looks at the dynamics set in motion by the announcement of the presidential election results, with specific focus on the issues behind the formation of the new cabinet and the establishment of the High Council for National Reconciliation. Section 3 delves into the US-Taliban peace deal and looks at the intra-Afghan talks that followed in September. Section 4 addresses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the country's economy, and the way in which the government handled the situation in the country. Section 5 analyzes Afghanistan's international relations, with specific focus on Kabul's relations with Islamabad, New Delhi and Beijing.

2. Presidential election results and cabinet formation

Almost five months after the September 2019 presidential elections, on 18th February 2020 the incumbent President Ashraf Ghani was declared the winner of the presidential vote, the final results of which were announced by the Independent Election Commission.¹

Table 1 – Afghanistan Presidential Election Result		
Candidate	Number of Votes	Share of votes (%)
Mohammad Ashraf Ghani	923,592	50.64
Dr. Abdullah Abdullah	720,841	39.52
Gulbedin Hekmatyar	70,241	3.85
Rahmatullah Nabil	33,919	1.86
Source: Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan, 'Afghanistan 2019 Presidential Election' (http://www.iec.org.af/results/en/home/final_votes).		

1. For an analysis of the issues that led to the delay in the announcement, see: Filippo Boni, 'Afghanistan 2019: Between peace talks and presidential elections, another year of uncertainty', *Asia Maior*, XXIX/2019, pp. 435-449.

Although Ashraf Ghani praised «the brave women of Afghanistan who made up 31% of the turnout in the elections» and was calling for all parties to «come to unite our country», the other presidential candidates, listed in Table 1 with their respective vote count, rejected the results.² Reminiscent of the disputed 2014 elections, runner-up and former Chief Executive Dr Abdullah Abdullah, claimed that he was the winner «based on clean votes» and that he was going to «form the inclusive government».³ While not claiming victory, other prominent presidential candidates echoed Abdullah's sentiments. Rahmatullah Nabil, former director of the National Directorate of Security, decried the «death of democracy» and termed the election results as «fraudulent», while simultaneously calling for a «reconciliation government».⁴ Similarly, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Islamist Hizb-e-Islami party, opposed the creation of a parallel government, but called for «an inclusive government where all see themselves represented, including the Taliban».⁵

The lack of acceptance of the electoral result, and the political fragmentation that ensued, had permeated political developments in the ensuing months around a number of key areas, including: a) finding a way out of the political impasse; b) cabinet formation; c) and the establishment of a High Council for National Reconciliation, tasked with supervising the peace process with the Taliban.

With regards the political impasse, its most visible manifestation were the parallel ceremonies of Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. Both candidates had signalled their intention to press ahead with the swearing in ceremonies in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of results in February. It was only because of the intervention by US Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, that the presidential taking of office was pushed back to 9 March.⁶ Despite attempts until the very last minute by Khalilzad to avert the parallel swearing-in ceremonies, these eventually took place. Interestingly, US officials and European Union diplomats attended Ghani's ceremony of taking the oath of office, a move that clearly strengthened Ghani's position in the power struggle with Adbullah. The two candidates managed to reach an agreement on 17 May 2020⁷. The

2. 'We have Come to Unite Our Nation: Ghani', *Tolo News*, 19 February 2019.

3. 'Abdullah Rejects Results, Announces Formation of «Inclusive Govt»', *Tolo News*, 18 February 2020.

4. 'Nabil Suggests «Reconciliation Govt.» Rejects Election Results', *Tolo News*, 20 February 2020.

5. 'Hekmatyar Rejects Results: Ghani Chose «Path of Crisis»', *Tolo News*, 19 February 2020.

6. The postponement was agreed in order to pre-empt any major fall out in the political crisis, ahead of the signing of the historic agreement between the US and the Taliban in Doha at the end of February.

7. Between the parallel taking office in March and the agreement in May, there have been three attempts at mediation carried out by: a group led by former president Hamed Karzai; a parliamentary delegation of 40 MPs; and a delegation of senior female politicians.

deal envisaged a power-sharing cabinet and the establishment of a High Council for National Reconciliation, led by Dr Abdullah, to supervise the peace process.⁸ But even as an agreement was reached, the difficulties in forming a new government were far from over.

The shadow of the political impasse following the elections loomed large over cabinet formation, as mistrust and power struggles led to wrangling over the distribution of cabinet posts. As a result, it took Ghani almost seven months to finalize the list of his 25 cabinet nominees, who were placed before the Wolesi Jirga (lower house) for approval, as required by the Constitution. As of early December, the Wolesi Jirga approved 20 out of the 25 nominees. According to Wolesi Jirga Deputy Secretary Ojatullah Kheradmand, such widespread support may have derived from a desire to show unity vis-à-vis the Taliban as well as «to show a strong stance in the face of continuing violence across the country despite the ongoing talks».⁹ With 19 ministers and the director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) formally confirmed, the government was still to introduce four nominees for ministries and one for the central bank. However, given the difficulties faced in forming the cabinet, presidents tend to keep acting ministers in place even if they have been rejected by the Wolesi Jirga.¹⁰

The final contentious point was the establishment of the HCNR, whose formation was occurring simultaneously to that of the cabinet. The HCNR was envisaged to comprise a leadership committee and a general assembly. In August 2020, President Ghani nominated the 46 members of the leadership committee through a decree. This was nevertheless rejected by some of the key political figures, including Dr Abdullah, on the grounds that according to the 17 May power-sharing agreement it was Dr Abdullah's right to lead the peace process and thereby appoint members of the HCNR.¹¹ While this provides evidence of the very divided and factional nature of the Afghan political system, political infighting had important implications on the conduct of peace talks with the Taliban, that will be the focus of the next section.

8. 'Ghani and Abdullah Sign Agreement to Break Political Deadlock', *Tolo News*, 17 May 2020.

9. Ali Yawar Adili & Rohullah Soroush, 'Afghanistan's New – But Still Incomplete Cabinet: No end yet to acting ministers', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 6 December 2020.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Ali Yawar Adili, 'Peace Leadership: Power struggles, division and an incomplete council', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 6 September 2020.

3. *Towards peace in Afghanistan: the US-Taliban peace deal and intra-Afghan negotiations*

The just described political impasse and wrangling among the major Afghan political actors took place in parallel to negotiations between the US and the Taliban on a peace deal, eventually signed on 29 February.¹² The deal came after 18 months of intense negotiations and deadlocks, and after nearly 20 years of war. Although the peace process in Afghanistan has only just begun, the agreement between the US and the Taliban is nothing short of historic. The main points of the «Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan» include:

- a) the US commitment to a phased withdrawal of all US and NATO troops from Afghanistan within 14 months of signing the accord;
- b) a pledge by the Taliban to prevent any group or individual from using Afghan soil to threaten the US and its allies;
- c) the Taliban's promise to sever ties with terrorist organizations including Al-Qā'ida;
- d) a prisoner swap;
- e) the start of intra-Afghan negotiations;
- f) sanctions removal.

In addition to the terms just outlined, the agreement also includes a number of secret annexes, whose undisclosed contents have raised concerns among members of the US Congress about their nature.¹³ Critics of the agreement have noted that the absence of the Afghan government from the US-Taliban talks epitomized the US's desire to prioritize a military withdrawal over a more articulated political settlement, preserving at least some of the social gains made in the country since 2001.¹⁴

The Taliban's position on the agreement was anticipated in a controversial editorial published in the *New York Times*, in which the deputy leader of the Taliban, Sirajuddin Haqqani, outlined his organization's views on the peace process as well as on the future of Afghanistan.¹⁵ In Haqqani's

12. US State Department, 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America', 29 February 2020. Full text available here: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

13. Clayton Thomas, 'Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief', *Congressional Research Service*, R45122, Updated 10 November 2020.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Sirajuddin Haqqani, 'What the Taliban Want', *New York Times*, 20 February 2020. The editorial was controversial because Haqqani is a designated terrorist by the FBI and the State Department is offering a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading to his arrest. For reaction to the editorial, see: John R. Allen, 'Sirajuddin Haqqani, Terrorist', *Brookings Institution*, 21 February 2020.

view, once the country was «liberated from foreign domination and interference», it would be possible to «find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam – from the right to education to the right to work – are protected, and where merit is the basis for equal opportunity».¹⁶

In the months immediately following the agreement, there were a number of stumbling blocks towards the implementation of the terms agreed between the Taliban and the US. On the one hand, the Afghan government resisted the release of Taliban detainees to which the US was committed under the accord; on the other hand, the insurgents continued to carry out acts of violence.¹⁷ Even though, according to the United Nations, civilian casualties were at their lowest since 2012 in the first nine months of 2020, the 6,000 casualties recorded were still very high and far from the Afghan government's request for a permanent ceasefire.¹⁸

Despite these difficulties, the Taliban and the Afghan government eventually agreed to start an historical peace process on 12 September in Doha. The first phase of the talks was aimed at formulating a «code of conduct», determining the rules that would guide the talks in the ensuing phases. Some of the more formal points, including starting each session with a recitation of the Quran, ending with prayers, and treating each other with respect, were agreed very quickly. However, differences persisted around the way in which the future of Afghanistan should look like.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the two sides managed to reach an agreement on 2 December on the procedural rules for the second phase of the talks, focused on key issues, including the very contentious definition of the role of Islam in the political setting expected to emerge from these talks.²⁰

Against such backdrop, how to reconcile the role of women in a society with the Taliban's radical interpretation of Islam has been a major point of contention, and one that is going to take centre stage in the issue-based phase of the talks. In an open letter to the Taliban, the Coalition of Afghan

16. Sirajuddin Haqqani, 'What the Taliban Want'.

17. 'Keeping Intra-Afghan Talks on Track', *International Crisis Group*, 30 September 2020.

18. United Nations Assistance Mission In Afghanistan, 'Afghanistan: Protection Of Civilians In Armed Conflict - Third Quarter Report: 1 January To 30 September 2020', October 2020.

19. Lyse Doucet, 'Afghan-Taliban peace talks: What's next?', *BBC News*, 22 September 2020.

20. 'Doha Breakthrough: Afghan Negotiators Agree on Procedural Rules', *Tolo News*, 2 December 2020. The two competing visions about the future of Afghanistan see on the one side the government willing to retain the post-Bonn Agreement constitutional republic, and, on the opposite side, the Taliban envisioning an emirate with absolute executive authority. For a detailed discussion of the two positions, see: Muska Dastageer, 'To succeed, intra-Afghan talks must defer to the non-ideal', *Atlantic Council*, 16 December 2020.

Women has expressed concerns about the Taliban's lack of clarity on the role that they envisage for women. The letter pointed out that «you have resisted explaining your interpretations of Shari 'a and the Afghan traditions of which you speak. Respectfully, your interpretation is one of many». It also invited them to sit together in order to try to «overcome the polarized views» about the role of women and the country's future.²¹ As human rights activist Wazhma Frogh eloquently put in an opinion piece for the CNN, «how will the Taliban, with their outdated and regressive rules, reconcile their beliefs with today's Afghanistan?».²² In areas of Afghanistan still controlled by the Taliban, women continue to be mistreated and deprived of basic rights, such as education and work outside the home. MP Fawzia Koofi, who was part of the team tasked with negotiating with the Taliban, reported how during meetings with the Taliban representatives she «told them that Afghanistan was now represented by diverse views and the country was not bound by one ideology», and that their view was that «a woman can become prime minister but not president. They also said women can't be judges».²³

4. Afghanistan's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the economy

Most of the key political developments discussed in the previous parts of this article occurred against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, that hit the country amidst political uncertainty. Afghanistan's first COVID-19 case was recorded on 24th February in the western province of Herat bordering Iran.²⁴ Following the return of around 200,000 migrant workers from Iran after an outbreak in that country, all 34 Afghan provinces recorded cases shortly after.²⁵ The Afghan government responded promptly to the outbreak by shutting down schools, universities, government offices and all non-essential businesses in Kabul and provincial capitals. According to the Coronavirus Government Response Tracker compiled by the University of Oxford, Afghanistan implemented some of the strictest measures, with the highest score at 84.26, on a scale from 0 to 100 in which 100 is the strictest. Comparing Afghanistan's response to that of China or Italy, two of the pandemic's

21. 'Open Letter By Afghan Women To The Taliban', 13 August 2020 (<https://afghanistanpeacecampaign.org/2020/09/11/open-letter-by-afghan-women-to-the-taliban>).

22. Wazhma Frogh, 'If the Taliban regain power, I could lose everything', *CNN Opinion*, 26 February 2020.

23. Swaminathan Natarajan, 'Afghan peace talks: The woman who negotiated with the Taliban', *BBC News*, 27 February 2020.

24. 'Afghanistan confirms first coronavirus case in province bordering Iran', *Reuters*, 24 February 2020.

25. Andrew Quilty, 'Afghanistan's unseen Covid crisis', *The Interpreter*, 12 August 2020.

hardest hit countries and toughest lockdowns, Italy has the highest score at 93/100 and China the second highest 81/100, in February 2020.²⁶ While the government acted swiftly and with a strong set of measures, Afghanistan's weak health system struggled to cope with the testing and hospital admissions arising from the growing numbers of COVID-19 patients. In August 2020, Ahmad Jawad Osmani, the acting health minister, declared that around 10 million Afghans, roughly 31% of the population, were infected with the coronavirus.²⁷ Given the limited testing capacity, with only six operational provincial labs, in addition to the 27 operating in Kabul at the end of September 2020, it is difficult to verify these figures.²⁸ As of early December 2020, only 154,603 people out of a population of 36.7 million were tested.²⁹

The impact of the pandemic on people's livelihoods was dramatic. According to a report released in December 2020 by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the World Health Organization, Afghanistan has the second highest number of people in emergency food insecurity in the world (5.5 million).³⁰ Because of the unemployment deriving from the pandemic-related lockdowns, household debt has rapidly grown in terms of both the number of people in debt and the scale of that debt. Among the displaced households surveyed, for 53% the primary reason for taking on debt was to pay for food.³¹ The pandemic also heavily impacted the economy, due to the constraints imposed «on consumption, exports, and remittances».³² The Asian Development Bank (ADB) forecasts Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) to contract by 5.0% in 2020, with a projected growth of 1.5% in 2021. As ADB Country Director for Afghanistan, Narendra Singru, noted, «the economy could witness positive growth next year if the intra-Afghan peace negotiations succeed and bring a speedy political settlement, in addition to stronger commitments from development partners at the upcoming Afghanistan Conference 2020».³³ Average inflation in the first 6 months of 2020 more than doubled from 2.5% a year earlier to 5.3%, and exports declined by 28% in the first half of 2020 from the same period in 2019.³⁴

26. Thomas Hale *et al.*, *COVID-19 Government Response Tracker*, Oxford: Blavatnik School of Government, 2020.

27. '«10M» COVID-19 Cases in Afghanistan: Health Ministry', *Tolo News*, 5 August 2020.

28. Rohullah Sorush, 'Covid-19 in Afghanistan (6): A closer look at the MoPH's official figures', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 24 September 2020.

29. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the World Health Organization, *Afghanistan: Strategic Situation Report: COVID-19*, No. 86, 3 December 2020.

30. *Ibid*

31. *Ibid*.

32. 'The World Bank In Afghanistan – Overview'.

33. Asian Development Bank, 'Afghanistan's GDP to Contract in 2020 Due to COVID-19; Small Recovery Projected for 2021', *News Release*, 15 September 2020.

34. *Ibid*.

5. *The international relations of Afghanistan*

Very much like its domestic politics, Afghanistan's geopolitics in the year under examination were dominated by the implications of the peace deal between the US and the Taliban. The importance of the regional setting for the dynamics discussed here is demonstrated by Abdullah Abdullah's sustained attempts at seeking regional support for the peace process, testified by the visits he made between September and November 2020 to Pakistan, India, Iran, and Uzbekistan.³⁵ On a more granular level, the peace deal, and the subsequent intra-Afghan talks, provided Pakistan with a favourable policy framework, one in which the Taliban are a recognized stakeholder in deciding the future of Afghanistan. While this certainly favours Pakistan's approach to the country, it has somewhat undermined India's policy towards Afghanistan, one that sees New Delhi engaging almost exclusively with the elected government in Kabul. Between the diverging approaches adopted by India and Pakistan, China continued in what can be defined as a hedging approach, seeking to maintain stable relations with the Afghan government, while simultaneously engaging with the Taliban.

5.1. *India and Pakistan in Afghanistan*

India's approach to Afghanistan in 2020 continued along the main objective that characterized its policy in previous decades, namely balancing Pakistan's influence in the country. To this end, New Delhi has supported the elected government in Kabul, also trying to use Afghanistan as a corridor to Central Asia, in order to outflank Pakistan. Not much progress was made in 2020 on either front.

During the political impasse discussed above, New Delhi strongly opposed the parallel taking office of Ghani and Abdullah, throwing its weight behind the former. It did so for a number of reasons: one was the fact that «Ghani enjoys relatively more US support than Abdullah, [and he] has a team that India can trust to secure its interests better»; another was that New Delhi could not afford having its horse in the peace process weakened by factional politics when confronting the Taliban.³⁶ India's support for the elected representatives in Afghanistan was reiterated during Abdullah Abdullah's visit to New Delhi in October 2020, during which the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation noted how India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, «stated that his country is in favour [of] an independent, democratic, sovereign & peaceful Afghanistan, where no ter-

35. United Nations Assistance Mission In Afghanistan, *Report to the Secretary General: The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security*, A/75/634-S/2020/1182, 9 December 2020.

36. Avinash Paliwal, 'India must support its allies in Kabul', *The Hindustan Times*, 24 February 2020.

rorists can operate».³⁷ While India's policy consistency has certainly won New Delhi some good will among key Afghan political leaders, Pakistan's superior influence in the wider US-Taliban peace process was evident. The Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was present in Doha at the signing of the US-Taliban peace deal, a clear signal of Islamabad's centrality in reaching this agreement.³⁸ Importantly, India was represented by its Ambassador to Qatar.³⁹

Beyond the peace process, India also attempted to turn Afghanistan into an access point to Central Asian markets in an effort to circumvent Pakistan. The most visible manifestation of this strategy has been India's investment in the Iranian port of Chahbahar, aimed at balancing Chinese investment in the Pakistani port of Gwadar. But on this front too, there was limited progress. In January 2020, the Gwadar port officially started taking cargo under the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), the first time that the port was being used for goods to the Afghan market. This was an important development as one of the motives behind the development of Chahbahar has been to remove the monopoly of Afghan trade from Pakistan. By providing an additional port, Gwadar aims to gain an advantage over Chahbahar in terms of trade relations with Afghanistan. The importance that Gwadar has for Pakistan's policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan was clearly stated by the Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi in December 2020: «Gwadar Port can be helpful [...]. We want to make trade agreements more active to promote bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan».⁴⁰

While India saw its position weakened as a result of the developments in 2020, Pakistan witnessed the materialization of its ideal policy scenario/framework. Islamabad's role in the Afghan theatre was central throughout 2020, and the signing of the US-Taliban peace deal was largely regarded as a success for Pakistan, since it legitimized its preferred interlocutor – the Taliban – at the negotiating table with the Afghan government. This point was also made clear by a report produced for the US Congress by the Lead Inspector General Defense for Overseas Contingency Operations (namely the joint agency initiative charged with oversighting overseas contingency operations), which noted that Pakistan «views increased Taliban influence in Afghanistan as supporting its overall objectives and will seek to influence

37. 'NSA Ajit Doval meets Afghan peace negotiator Abdullah Abdullah in Delhi', *The Hindustan Times*, 7 October 2020.

38. 'US-Taliban peace deal: Qureshi to represent Pakistan at Doha ceremony today', *The News International*, 29 February 2020.

39. 'India to attend U.S.-Taliban peace deal ceremony in Doha', *The Hindu*, 28 February 2020.

40. 'Qureshi welcomes Taliban team in Islamabad, reiterates Pakistan's desire for durable Afghan peace', *Dawn*, 16 December 2020.

intra-Afghan peace talks in a direction favourable to Pakistan».⁴¹ While the political leadership played an important role, as testified by the Foreign Minister's presence in Doha at the signing of the agreement, Pakistan's powerful military retained its centrality in these dynamics. US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad met with the Pakistani chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Qamar Javed Bajwa eight times between January 2020 and January 2021.⁴² In addition, the Pakistani COAS visited Afghanistan in June, and met with President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah to reiterate Pakistan's support to the ongoing peace process.⁴³

The second half of 2020 was characterized by three major developments in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties: first, Abdullah Abdullah's visit to Pakistan in September; second, Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Afghanistan in November, the first since he took office following the July 2018 elections; third, a delegation of the Afghan Taliban visiting Islamabad in December, during the break agreed in the intra-Afghan talks. As for Abdullah's visit, this came shortly after the preliminary phase of the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban had started. The visit served to cement some marginal improvements in the bilateral ties between the two countries, with Abdullah acknowledging that Pakistan «played an important role in the Afghan peace process» and advocating for «fresh approaches toward peace».⁴⁴ With regards to the Pakistani Prime Minister's visit to Kabul, the main result was the issuing of the document «Shared Vision between Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and Islamic Republic of Pakistan, to Support Peace and Stability in Both Countries and the Wider Region»,⁴⁵ that was calling the two sides to develop a «special relationship», as well as to

41. Office of Inspector General, United States Department of Defense, *Operation Freedom's Sentinel. Lead Inspector General Report To The United States Congress*, 1 January 2020 – 31 March 2020, pp. 1-88.

42. The visits took place in January, April, May, June, October, November, and December 2020 and in early January 2021. 'Pakistan reiterates backing for US efforts for Afghan peace', *Dawn*, 15 April 2020; 'Pakistan, US review Afghan peace process', *Dawn*, 8 June 2020; 'Khalilzad discusses Afghan peace process with Bajwa', *Dawn*, 9 October 2020; 'US envoy Khalilzad calls on COAS to discuss Afghan peace process, regional security situation', *Dawn*, 2 November 2020; 'Top US officials hold talks with Pakistan army chief Gen Bajwa', *Gulf News*, 15 December 2020; 'Pakistan, US reaffirm pledge to work for Afghan peace', *Dawn*, 5 January 2021.

43. 'Pakistan's Gen. Bajwa Meets with Afghan Leaders, Discusses Peace', *Tolo News*, 9 June 2020.

44. 'Abdullah Abdullah emphasizes 'drawing lessons from realities of past four decades', *The Express Tribune*, 29 September 2020.

45. Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Shared Vision between Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and Islamic Republic of Pakistan, to Support Peace and Stability in Both Countries and the Wider Region*, 19 November 2020 (<http://mofa.gov.pk/shared-vision-between-islamic-republic-of-afghanistan-and-islamic-republic-of-pakistan-to-support-peace-and-stability-in-both-countries-and-the-wider-region>).

develop trade and connectivity.⁴⁶ Finally, the visit by the Taliban delegation to Islamabad in December 2020 was testament to the importance that Pakistan played in the Afghan peace process and a further attempt at projecting Pakistan as an indispensable mediator in the talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

5.2. *China's hedging towards Afghanistan*

After years in which China's role in Afghanistan had increased significantly in 2020, complicit in the crucial role played by the US in the signing of the peace deal with the Taliban, China has been a less visible actor than in previous years. During the year under examination, Beijing has taken a backseat in what was a US-dominated year, with an eye on preserving its security interests – most notably the internal stability of Xinjiang⁴⁷ – and cultivating relations with both the Taliban and the elected government. The rationale behind Beijing's hedging between these two actors in the Afghan theatre, stems from a clear-eyed assessment about the difficulties, as noted above, in the intra-Afghan peace talks, as well as from the legitimization of the Taliban as a key political interlocutor in the future of Afghanistan.⁴⁸ In addition, China can also rely on its close ties with Pakistan, and the latter's leverage over the insurgent organization to advance its interests. As a testament of the close coordination between Islamabad and Beijing on this matter, in September 2020, China's special envoy for Afghanistan, Ambassador Liu Jian, met Taliban leader Mullah Baradar in Doha and, only five days later, Pakistan's special representative for Afghanistan, Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq. During the meeting, Liu expressed the support of China for the Afghan peace process.⁴⁹

With regards to the US-Taliban peace deal, China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian stated that China welcomed the agreement. He also added that «foreign troops in Afghanistan should withdraw in an orderly and responsible way to ensure a smooth transition» to prevent «a security vacuum, which terrorist organizations may take advantage of».⁵⁰ China was one of the countries that congratulated President Ghani after his taking

46. 'Pakistan will do everything possible to reduce violence in Afghanistan, says PM Imran on maiden Kabul visit', *Dawn*, 19 November 2020.

47. Ghulam Ali 'China-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan: assessing key interests and implementing strategies', *The Pacific Review*, [online first], November 2020.

48. Yun Sun, 'China's Strategic Assessment of Afghanistan', *War on the Rocks*, 8 April 2020; Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'A BRI(dge) Too Far: The Unfulfilled Promise And Limitations Of China's Involvement In Afghanistan', *Brookings Institution*, June 2020.

49. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, *Press Release*, 24 September 2020.

50. 'China welcomes U.S.-Taliban peace deal: FM spokesperson', *Xinhua*, 2 March 2020.

office on 9 March, «calling on all parties in Afghanistan to prioritize the interests of the country and the people, forge consensus, and facilitate the process of peaceful reconstruction and reconciliation».⁵¹ A similar message was delivered at the end of the 3rd round of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue, held online in July. In this occasion, the three countries essentially reiterated their commitment to the Afghan peace process, with Pakistan and China hoping that intra-Afghan peace talks would start soon.⁵²

Afghanistan also featured as part of Beijing's «masks diplomacy» during the pandemic. In a piece titled «A Brother in Weal and Woe, China Aids Afghanistan with Medical Supplies», Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan Wang Yu, emphatically praised the Sino-Afghan friendship that «stems from the mountains and rivers connecting us but also is rooted in the fearlessness and solidarity of two ancient civilizations through difficulties and dangers». The Chinese Ambassador thanked those Afghans who had helped China at the height of the pandemic. He then went on remembering the medical supplies, including protective equipment, ventilators and face masks, that Beijing had provided once the pandemic hit Afghanistan. He concluded his piece remarking that «China is making great effort to contribute its part to the world's fight against the pandemic with a high sense of responsibility».⁵³ This was in line with similar messages that Chinese Diplomats and state media have projected across countries in Asia and Europe, in what has been dubbed as «face masks» diplomacy.

6. Conclusion

The two landmark events that characterized Afghanistan's political developments in 2020, namely the US-Taliban peace deal and the beginning of intra-Afghan talks, represent key stepping stones on which to build the future of Afghanistan. The very fact that the Taliban and the government in Kabul have sat across the same table and started talking to each other through an institutional consultation mechanism, represented an important start to a negotiating process that will define the country's social and political contours for years to come. As the two sides embark on the second phase of the talks, there are a number of issues that cast some uncertainty

51. 'China congratulates Afghan President Ghani on inauguration for second term', *Xinhua*, 10 March 2020.

52. Kamran Yousaf, 'Pakistan, China, Afghanistan seek «orderly» US withdrawal to prevent terror resurgence', *The Express Tribune*, 7 July 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Joint Press Release of the 3rd Round China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue*, 7 July 2020.

53. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *A Brother in Weal and Woe, China Aids Afghanistan with Medical Supplies*, 13 April 2020.

on the unfolding of the process. First, the Taliban signalled that they are not willing to abandon the use of violence, what has been defined as a «fight-and-talk strategy», as the use of violence represents the group's main source of leverage at the negotiating table.⁵⁴ Second, the Taliban and the Afghan government are still very much anchored in their positions, and a breakthrough will require compromises and some concessions that neither side seems to be prepared to concede. Finally, from a geopolitical point of view, it is important to consider how the new Biden presidency is going to impact the US's commitment to the process.

54. Abdul Qadir Sediqi, 'Fight and talk: Facing negotiations, Taliban almost took key Afghan city', *Reuters*, 14 September 2020.